

63

REMARKS  
OF  
HON. WILLIAM D. KELLEY,  
OF PENNSYLVANIA,  
IN

SUPPORT OF THE BILL EQUALIZING THE PAY,  
RATIONS, CLOTHING, AND ARMING  
OF OUR SOLDIERS.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, APRIL 30, 1864.

MR. SPEAKER : The fact that we are at this late day discussing the proposition before us, that of giving equal pay, rations, clothing, and arms to all our soldiers without regard to their complexion, is pregnant evidence of the terrible weight of prejudice which has clouded the judgment and conscience of the American people. Late as it is, however, the fact that we have come to the question gives us hope that that prejudice is disappearing, and that peace will soon come to our country and prosperity thenceforth abide within its borders. But for our pride of race and prejudice against color we would not now be providing the means to carry on a war. I allude not to the fatal truth that despots in the South and demagogues in the North fostered this prejudice, and found it the means of inducing a people devoted to personal liberty to acquiesce in, and in some instances to battle for the extension of the area and the perpetuation of human slavery. No, sir, I pass by the question of the cause of war, and say that but for our unchristian contempt for the colored race we would now be at peace; that the authority of our Government would have long since been re-established over all our territory; or that if the spirit of the rebellion had still required to be repressed by the presence of military power, an army of disciplined freedmen would have relieved the men of the North of the duty of maintaining it, and permitted them to return to their families and the profitable avocations of peaceful life. Has not our prejudice furnished men, money, and supplies to our enemy, while enfeebling our Army, restraining it from action, and paralyzing a large part of our naval power? The cry that the war was no longer for the Constitution, but had been perverted into a war for the negro, has had but little influence in preventing brave and loyal men from rallying "round the flag."

I allude not to that mere hiss of a venomous serpent, but to the fact that but for this pervading and controlling prejudice we would

have long since drawn from the laborers of the South an army of three hundred thousand men. This prejudice it was that prevented the country from demanding of the President an early proclamation promising freedom and protection to all loyal people of the South who might make their way to our lines, and arms to such as would enter our service. The demoniac howl that went forth at Fremont's order was but an expression of the prejudice the prevalence of which made Cameron's proposition to arm slaves impracticable and constrained the disbanding of the regiment of colored men enlisted by General Hunter. In those days men would rather die or give their sons victims to the pestilential swamp or battle-field than accept the idea that the negro was fit to be a freeman or a soldier. Congress, slowly escaping from this prejudice, halted in its great duty, and our good and sagacious President could not see a "military necessity" in a measure which he was led to believe would demoralize the Army and arrest enlistments. Meanwhile the men who would so gladly have earned their freedom by serving us were coffled and driven South to raise supplies for the rebel army, to labor in forge and foundery, to dig trenches and rear breastworks, and to man guns aimed at those whose presence among them they were ready to hail as a Heaven-granted blessing.

Sir, the sailor who enters our Navy gets no bounty. He accepts the chance for prize money as its fair equivalent; yet a few weeks ago we passed an act authorizing the transfer to the Navy of twelve thousand soldiers to whom we had given Government and municipal bounties. It was not that they could be spared from the Army; for while the measure was under consideration, or about that time, the President issued a call for two hundred thousand more soldiers. I marked the coincidence, and thought that God was thus teaching us the folly, the stupid, wicked folly of yielding to that prejudice which gentlemen on the other side of the House are now striving so ingeniously to exasperate. At the time we passed that act the press of the country was denouncing the inefficiency of the blockade and proclaiming the relative cheapness and abundant supply of foreign goods in confederate ports, and steamers and monitors which might have made the blockade effective, lay at rented wharves in northern ports, the department being unable to procure sailors to man them. No one will deny that the negro makes a good sailor. He seems to have a natural aptitude for the profession. You find him in the merchantmen of all nations, and he is welcomed by officers and men on all our national vessels. In this branch of the service negroes have always been employed, and our naval records vindicate them abundantly from the charge of cowardice with which honorable gentlemen on this floor so meanly asperse them. They constituted a large part of every crew our department sent forth in the war of 1812, and their courage, as the records prove, did much to add that effulgence to the stars of our flag in the light of which the "meteor flag of England" paled and grew dim. Had we welcomed the slaves of the South to our services, and treated them as men, the sails of our ships would not have flapped idly at city wharves and our country suffered because they were not filled by the free winds of the



ocean. When will we learn that the justice of God permits no wrong to go unpunished.

History, it is said, reproduces itself. We speak of coincidences in history, and are often reminded that on the 19th of April, in two great national eras, Massachusetts blood was shed at the opening of great wars; and I may take the liberty, in the course of this discussion, of reminding the House that the first blood shed in each era was that of a negro. The first that flowed in Massachusetts was prior to that which sanctified the plains of Lexington. It was the life-blood of Peter Attucks, a negro man, who died leading a Boston mob against British soldiery; and, as I had occasion to suggest to the House last evening, before the blood of Massachusetts had dyed the streets of Baltimore, that of a negro man, Nicholas Biddle, hastening with less than five hundred volunteers from Pennsylvania to the defense of this capital, had stained the streets of that city through which the little column marched.

It may have been a mere coincidence; but these certainly are facts which it becomes a body of legislators, who profess to believe that "all men are created equal," to bear in mind. They are facts which should have done something to remove the prejudice which has cursed us so heavily, especially within the last three years, almost as heavily, indeed, as it has cursed the five million colored Americans against whom it operates.

The gentleman from Indiana, (Mr. HOLMAN,) tells us that he does not think that negro troops ought to have been enlisted. Sir, does he still think that the rebellion would have been feebler with twelve million people to sustain it than we have found it with but eight million? Does he believe that it were better to-day that the one hundred and thirty thousand negro soldiers, who are in arms to fight the rebels, should be in arms to fight our sons and brothers and friends? I ask him to explain whether his sympathies are with the loyal men of the North, or are with the rebels in arms against their country. Why should these one hundred and thirty thousand fighting men be handed over to the other side or be deducted from our strength? There is not, sir, in the ranks of our Army a soldier who will agree with the gentleman from Indiana. There is not a mother at home, praying night and morning for the welfare of her first-born boy on the field, who does not thank God that there are in the Army with him the one hundred and thirty thousand men whom the gentleman from Indiana would transfer to the enemy or doom to inaction. There is not a man who loves his country who will not arraign the patriotism of one who would strike such a force from our ranks, whether he would absolutely hand it over to the enemy or not. They ought not to have been enlisted, says the gentleman; and they have not been used so as to protect our soldiers. Ah! sir, if his son or brother be in the Army, or if the sons and brothers of his friends are there, they will rejoice that the honors of Milliken's Bend, Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, and Olustee were won by colored regiments and not by those to which they were attached. Whose blood would the gentleman from Indiana have desired to see shed there? Will he tell his constituents that the men from his district should have kept the negro safe from the batteries of

Wagner and Hudson and Olustee? Will he go into his district and complain that they were not Indiana troops who were hacked to death, crucified, and burned in Fort Pillow? No, sir, he will not so argue to his constituents. When he confronts them on this subject he will cavil, he will qualify, he will explain, he will protest that the report which will go forth is garbled; that in his opinion it is well to use the negro to save the white man; that he rejoices that other men, men of darker hue than his friends and constituents, were put into the imminent deadly breach on those occasions.

It is, sir, well that we have enlisted these men. They have been used for the protection of white men, for the protection of the white man's Government, for the protection of the white man's flag, and when so used have fought gloriously in the hope of removing from the mind and heart of the white men of America, who have mind and heart, that prejudice which while it has oppressed them has cursed those whom it has controlled.

Sir, when we first spoke of enlisting negro soldiers, we were told on the other side of the House that it would reduce our great army—then under command of General McClellan—to the condition of Falstaff's ragged corps; that white soldiers would lay down their arms; that the announcement that we would permit negroes to bear arms would assure the success of the rebellion by producing a general exhibition of treason and desertion on the part of our armies. They were fools or traitors who believed that the hatred of our soldiers of the negro was more intense than their love of their country!

Tell me, you, or any of you who witnessed the passage of Burnside's splendid corps through this city the other day, whether you wished those eight thousand stalwart men of African descent were not in the Army. Tell me whether, as they marched down the broad streets, crowds of the wounded and maimed soldiers of the veteran reserve corps did not cheer them on. Tell me which of you did not admire the cheerfulness with which they marched toward the field which has been so fatal to those of their race who have been permitted to precede them. Tell me whether picked men from all your States are not ready to take command of them. I do not believe that able and tried soldiers are anxious to move at the head of a column of cowards, and I know that in our Philadelphia school for the instruction of officers for colored regiments, the gentleman's State is largely represented by men who are used to the whistling of the rifle ball and the boom and roar of the cannon. Two, at least, of the Indiana soldiers who graduated there had received the sanguinary baptism of battle at Pea Ridge.

The gentleman talks about the courage of these people, and doubts it. Sir, has he slept from the beginning of this war? Has he read no page of martial history? He says they will degrade our army. Will he tell us what influence the Turcos have exercised upon the armies of France? Will he tell us what influence the Sepoys have exercised upon the army of Great Britain? Will he enlighten us as to the complexion of the British, French, and Dutch armies in the West Indies? They are negroes, negroes all. And, sir, it is impossible to conceive that mere ignorance or prejudice against the negro



alone would exclude him from our Army and Navy. The opposition to this measure, conceal the fact as gentlemen may, springs from sympathy with the rebellion or blind devotion to human slavery. It is a shrewed device by which it is hoped to impose such grievous burdens on the people of the North as will make them yield to suggestions of peace. It can come from no other motive than love of slavery or sympathy with the so-called confederacy.

Mr. Speaker, the men of this era of whom the poet will sing in highest strains, the men whom the orator will most eulogize, the men in this grand civil war of whom the historian will write his most glowing panegyrics, are the negro soldiers of the loyal army. I never see a wounded soldier that I do not honor him. I cannot behold a column of citizen soldiers moving over yonder bridge or embarking for the field of battle without the tenderest emotions. I read the story of the battle-fields enriched by the blood of the cultivated, beautiful, and brave, and my heart swells with pride as I contemplate the gallantry of our countrymen. But white men fight for their country, for the glorious traditions of their ancestors, for their homes, their wives and their children. Not so with the poor negro of the southern States. He has no country, and wanting that, lacks all else.

I hail it as a sign of progress that gentlemen on the other side of the House talk to-day of a slave's wife and children. Oh! have three years brought you so far forward that you behold in the mother of a slave's child a woman and a possible wife? Have three years of terrible war brought you so far forward that in that little breathing, immortal being, you see the child and not the chattel? Who will deny that we are making progress? It may be slow, but when you admit that they are wife and child it shows that some little progress has been made where, judging by the light of experience, it would be least expected.

Sir, I found in a paper from my city, the Press of yesterday, the story of the death of one with whom I played in the earliest days of my childhood of which memory retains a hold. We were then younger than the light-haired child that stands by the corner of the Clerk's desk. He grew to manhood an elegant gentleman; he was skilled in art, gifted with a rare voice, and was a proficient in music. His education was liberal, and his manners and tone those of a gentleman. In early manhood he found admission to society from which his wife and sisters, who, though worthy, well educated, and well bred as he, were excluded. They could suggest that their father was a soldier of the revolutionary army and had endured the horrors of the British prison-ship, and point with just pride to his high standing as a man of enterprise and probity during the many years in which he was a leading sail-maker of what was then the first commercial port of the country; and they could speak of the incidents of foreign travel; but they were, in the estimation of people like the gentleman from Indiana, incapable of the courtesies of life, and of a race that is deficient in courage. To escape from degradation he went to London and engaged in business, and was prosperous. I ask the Clerk to read why he returned, where he is, and how he was borne thither.

The Clerk read, as follows :

"A SOLDIER'S FUNERAL.—The military escort which surrounds the hearse, bearing through our streets to the grave the body of one who has died in the service of his country, has familiarized the people with the last form of respect that is given to a soldier's memory. Yesterday, military ceremonies and honors were paid for the first time in this city to the remains of a colored man. The body of Robert Bridges Forten, late sergeant major forty-third regiment United States colored troops, was deposited in the family vault in the cemetery attached to St. Thomas's church, Fifth below Walnut street, with military honors. Sixteen of his late comrades, commanded by a sergeant, formed the funeral escort, and fired the three volleys of musketry over his grave prescribed by the Army regulations.

"Sergeant Major Forten was the son of the late James Forten, so long and so favorably known in this community, especially to the merchants and mariners of our city. He was liberally educated. For several years past he resided in London, and was a commercial agent for an extensive stationery house in the Poultry. On observing that the Government had summoned the colored race to arms, and was organizing a colored army for the defense of the Union and the salvation of liberty itself, he at once canceled his business engagements in England and hastened to this his native city to offer his services to his country. Finding that by the existing laws he could not be commissioned an officer to command colored troops, though qualified by education and peculiarly fitted by general character for such a responsible position, he resolved to enlist as a private. When counseled to reflect again on his determination, and advised that his age, about fifty years, made it doubtful whether he could undergo the fatigues and privations of the service, that his education was vastly superior to his fellow-soldiers, that his habits and associations were strikingly dissimilar, and that no consideration or allowance could be given to these peculiarities, he replied that the reasons urged why he should not go into the service, with the exception of the one regarding his age, were incentives for him to volunteer. His country, he said, asked her colored children to rally to her defense, and those of them who had been blessed with education should be foremost in responding to the call. Actuated by these patriotic motives, he enlisted in the forty-third regiment, in which his talents were soon remarked, and he was made sergeant major. He was soon detailed on special service and ordered to report to Colonel S. M. Bowman, chief mustering and recruiting officer for colored troops for the State of Maryland. He entered into the business of recruiting in that State with intense zeal, and showed ability of the highest order. In the many speeches he made to the colored men of Baltimore, and by his logic, his eloquence, and his example, he largely contributed to the great success which has attended Colonel Bowman's efforts to raise colored troops in Maryland. That officer, in reporting to the Philadelphia supervisory committee, commended him as a soldier and a gentleman. Impelled by zealous devotion to the cause of his race and his country, he exerted himself beyond his powers of endurance, and, when attacked by sickness, it was soon seen that his prolonged labors had undermined his constitution. He died suddenly with erysipelas. He leaves a wife and boy in London, and a daughter, a teacher in the camp of the freedmen at Port Royal."

Mr. KELLEY. Sir, among the colored men of the North—

Mr. CRAVENS. If the gentleman will yield to me, I will move that the House adjourn.

Mr. KELLEY. I do not wonder that the gentleman wants the House to adjourn, but I decline to yield.

Sir, as I was about to remark, among the colored men of the North there are many other instances like that of the playmate of my young childhood. Men of high culture and considerable estate, men of refinement and accomplishments, who at ten dollars per month, and with no chance of promotion, have hurried into the ranks of our Army to fight for the preservation of a country, the logic of whose institutions assures freedom at some future day to their posterity and race. They have gone to the field of carnage relying on the justice of the American people for the just reward of their valor and patriotism. Surely such men will be remembered in song and history.

But the four millions of the South fight without a country, without home, without family; nay, such are the blessings of the institu-



tion of slavery which the gentleman from Kentucky so lauds, that they have not even been permitted to have a name lest it might tempt them to think of securing a home and maintaining the integrity of their family. Sir, home and family are very dangerous to such despotism as has prevailed in the South.

Mr. CLAY. As the gentleman seems anxious to hear me, I will interrupt him for a moment.

Mr. KELLEY. Be brief.

Mr. CLAY. The gentleman seems to be a profound scholar of history. He knows the history apparently of all the nations of the earth, and of every individual in those nations. But he seems to be deficient in the history of his own State. I refer him back to the war of 1812-14. The State of Pennsylvania as well as other States sent brave troops to fight the British, but when these troops reached the northern part of our territory, near the lakes, there was a question raised about State lines and State boundaries.

Mr. KELLEY. As that was before my birth I do not remember about it.

Mr. CLAY. I want to inform the gentleman and he refuses to yield for the purpose.

Mr. KELLEY. It has no pertinency to the pending question.

Mr. STEVENS. I should like to know whether the negroes or the white men raised that question?

Mr. CLAY. I am coming to that.

Mr. KELLEY. I decline to yield further. I never heard that my State had any negroes in the Army in 1812, and we are now discussing the conduct and capabilities of that race. I say that the gentleman lauds the institution of slavery—

Mr. CLAY. I ask the gentleman from Pennsylvania to yield to me for a few moments.

Mr. KELLEY. If the gentleman will hear the sentence I am about to utter, perhaps there will be no necessity for him to interrupt me.

Mr. CLAY. They are putting the negroes of Kentucky under people who are cheating them of half their earnings. My friend from Massachusetts, (Mr. Eliot,) admitted it was probably true.

Mr. KELLEY. I decline to yield further. The gentleman's rambling remarks have nothing to do with the question under consideration. In the general discussion he complained of the treatment the freedmen are receiving at the hands of Government officials and others who employ them. He says these people cheat them out of half their earnings. I fear this may be true; and to prevent it I have implored Congress to establish a Freedman's Bureau. But it is apparent that the gentleman's sympathies are not excited by the wrongs perpetrated on the poor negroes. His complaint is not that they are cheated out of half their earnings, but that it is done by "thieves," "robbers," "scoundrels," and other official personages who have relieved them from slavery—a system which, under color of law, cheated them out of all their earnings, and appropriated their babes as chattels for the market. Unhappy as their present condition may be, it does leave them at least the ownership of the children of their loins; it does secure them transportation beyond the lines of their

former owners' plantation ; and it does open the way through freedom to a better life to those of the race who have capacity and energy and feel the glow of emulation. It is too late for the gentleman to hope to make converts by sounding the praises of slavery in comparison with any phase of freedom.

Mr. Speaker, I repeat that when we remember the cool and determined courage with which these men, without country, home, family, or name, save such as Tom, Jim, or Dick, fight without pay, and in the face of almost certain death, for the flag and institutions which inspire their poor hearts with hope for their race, we cannot doubt that the poet, orator, and historian will find inspiration in their unselfish devotion to a great cause. But dark will be the colors in which they will paint the actions of those who, while accepting the services of such heroes, would withhold from them the recognition of their common humanity. Let such men not hope that posterity will fail to do them justice too.

The bill before us is the more important because our enemies are fiendishly discriminating against negro soldiers. They deny the colored prisoner of war all the rights of a soldier ; they murder him in cold blood, and then turn to us and cite our example in proof of the propriety of the prejudice that governs them. "Why," ask they, "shall we recognize the negro as a soldier entitled to equality with our men while the Congress of the United States, the War Department, and the President withhold from them such recognition ? They make them fight without equal pay, and without hope of rank, and who shall brand us for discriminating against them in pursuance of such precedents as these."

To obliterate this unjust and odious distinction is our privilege. Gentlemen on the other side of the House may consistently vote for its continuance ; but the power of the House and the responsibility is with us of the Republican side, and should we fail to recognize the common manhood of our soldiers, the page of history which records our failure will be one the perusal of which will suffuse the cheeks of children with the burning blush of shame.